



Software Diversification for WebAssembly

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Abstract

WebAssembly, now the fourth officially recognized web language, enables web browsers to port native applications for the Web. Furthermore, WebAssembly has evolved into an essential element for backend scenarios such as cloud computing and edge computing. Therefore, WebAssembly finds use in a plethora of applications, including but not limited to, web browsers, blockchain, and cloud computing. Despite the emphasis on security since its design and specification, WebAssembly remains susceptible to various forms of attacks, including memory corruption and side-channels. Furthermore, WebAssembly has been manipulated to disseminate malware, particularly in cases of browser cryptojacking.

Web page resources, including those containing WebAssembly binaries, are predominantly served from centralized data centers in the modern digital landscape. Thousands of edge devices, in conjunction with browser clients, operate millions of identical WebAssembly instantiations every second. This phenomenon creates a highly predictable ecosystem, wherein potential attackers can anticipate behavior either in browsers or backend nodes. Such predictability escalates the potential impact of vulnerabilities within these ecosystems, paving the way for high-impact side-channel and memory attacks. For instance, a flaw in a web browser, instigated by a defective WebAssembly program, holds the potential to affect millions of users.

This thesis aims to bolster the security within the WebAssembly ecosystem through the introduction of Software Diversification methods and tools. Software Diversification is a strategy designed to augment the costs of exploiting vulnerabilities by making software unpredictable. The unpredictability within ecosystems can be diminished by automatically generating various program variants. These variants strengthen observable properties that are typically used to launch attacks, and in many instances, can completely eliminate such vulnerabilities.

This work introduces three tools: CROW, MEWE, and WASM-MUTATE. Each tool has been specifically designed to tackle a unique facet of Software Diversification. We present empirical evidence demonstrating the potential application of our Software Diversification methods to WebAssembly programs in two distinct ways: Offensive and Defensive Software Diversification. Our research into Offensive Software Diversification in WebAssembly unveils potential paths for enhancing the detection of WebAssembly malware. On the other hand, our experiments in Defensive Software Diversification show that WebAssembly programs can be hardened against side-channel attacks, specifically the Spectre attack.

Keywords: WebAssembly, Software Diversification, Side-Channels

Sammanfattning

LIST OF PAPERS

1. ***WebAssembly Diversification for Malware Evasion***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Tim Toady, Martin Monperrus, Benoit Baudry
Computers & Security, Volume 131, 2023, 17 pages
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167404823002067>
2. ***Wasm-mutate: Fast and Effective Binary Diversification for WebAssembly***
Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Nicholas Fitzgerald, Martin Monperrus, Benoit Baudry
Submitted to Computers & Security, under revision, 17 pages
<https://arxiv.org/pdf/2309.07638.pdf>
3. ***Multi-Variant Execution at the Edge***
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Moving Target Defense (MTD 2022), 12 pages
<https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3560828.3564007>
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Javier Cabrera-Arteaga, Orestis Floros, Oscar Vera-Pérez, Benoit Baudry, Martin Monperrus
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11th ACM SIGPLAN International Workshop on Virtual Machines and Intermediate Languages (SPLASH 2019), 10 pages
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3358504.3361228>

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Contents

List of Papers	iii
Acknowledgement	iv
Contents	1
 I Thesis	 4
1 Introduction	5
1.1 Predictability in WebAssembly ecosystems	7
1.2 Problems statements	9
1.3 Software Diversification	9
1.4 Summary of research papers.	10
 2 Background and state of the art	 13
2.1 WebAssembly	13
2.1.1 From source code to WebAssembly	14
2.1.2 WebAssembly’s binary format	17
2.1.3 WebAssembly’s runtime	18
2.1.4 WebAssembly’s control-flow	20
2.1.5 Security and reliability for WebAssembly	21
2.1.6 Open challenges	22
2.2 Software diversification	23
2.2.1 Automatic generation of software variants	24
2.2.2 Equivalence Checking	26
2.2.3 Variants deployment.	27
2.2.4 Measuring Software Diversification	28
2.2.5 Offensive or Defensive assessment of diversification	30

2.3	Open challenges for Software Diversification	30
3	Automatic Software Diversification for WebAssembly	32
3.1	CROW: Code Randomization of WebAssembly	33
3.1.1	Enumerative synthesis	34
3.1.2	Constant inferring	35
3.1.3	Exemplifying CROW	36
3.2	MEWE: Multi-variant Execution for WebAssembly	38
3.2.1	Multivariant call graph.	39
3.2.2	Exemplifying a Multivariant binary	39
3.3	WASM-MUTATE: Fast and Effective Binary Diversification for WebAssembly	42
3.3.1	WebAssembly Rewriting Rules	43
3.3.2	E-Graphs traversals	44
3.3.3	Exemplifying WASM-MUTATE	45
3.4	Comparing CROW, MEWE, and WASM-MUTATE	47
3.4.1	Security applications	50
4	Assessing Software Diversification for WebAssembly	52
4.1	Offensive Diversification: Malware evasion.	52
4.1.1	Cryptojacking defense evasion	53
4.1.2	Methodology	54
4.1.3	Results	56
4.2	Defensive Diversification: Speculative Side-channel protection . .	59
4.2.1	Threat model: speculative side-channel attacks	60
4.2.2	Methodology	61
4.2.3	Results	63
5	Conclusions and Future Work	68
5.1	Summary of technical contributions	68
5.2	Key results of the thesis	69
5.3	Future Work	70
5.3.1	Data augmentation for Machine Learning on WebAssembly programs.	70
5.3.2	Improving WebAssembly malware detection via canonicalization	71
5.3.3	Oneshot Diversification	72

<i>CONTENTS</i>	3
-----------------	---

References	73
-------------------	-----------

II Included papers	89
---------------------------	-----------

WebAssembly Diversification for Malware Evasion	91
---	-----------

Wasm-mutate: Fast and Effective Binary Diversification for WebAssembly	92
--	-----------

CROW: Code Diversification for WebAssembly	93
--	-----------

Multi-Variant Execution at the Edge	94
-------------------------------------	-----------

Superoptimization of WebAssembly Bytecode	95
---	-----------

Scalable Comparison of JavaScript V8 Bytecode Traces	96
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Part I

Thesis